

The Time of Acharya Sankara

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Abstract

It was the time when Buddhism was on the decline in India after flourishing for nearly a thousand years. In the midst of the prevailing degenerate religious and social conditions, Sankara was fired with the zeal of re-establishing the supremacy of the Vedic religion and philosophy in all its purity and grandeur and cleansing society of all accretions and excess by assimilating to it the good points in Buddhism that were in harmony with the Vedic teachings.

Key words- Sankara, Buddhism, Vedic dharma, Upanishads, Brahma Sutra

It was the time when Buddhism was on the decline in India after flourishing for nearly a thousand years. In the midst of the prevailing degenerate religious and social conditions, Sankara was fired with the zeal of re-establishing the supremacy of the Vedic religion and philosophy in all its purity and grandeur and cleansing society of all accretions and excess by assimilating to it the good points in Buddhism that were in harmony with the Vedic teachings.

Sankara saw the glory that was the Sanatana Dharma and the situation that was prevailing in the country. He saw that the Buddhism had degenerated into various corrupt

practices owing to the mass influx into the Buddhist fold of all sorts of unregenerate people.

Buddha's teachings were misunderstood and there was a lot of confusion in society.

The Buddha in his own time had criticised vain philosophical speculations and blind ritualism, involving often sacrifices of animals and the neglect of man and his suffering here. He started a reformatory movement, with emphasis on a practical ethical life of building up of character and attaining true wisdom and feeling sympathy and concern for the suffering of other beings, to offset the situation that was then current. In a sense he taught the transcendental Advaita aspect of Vedanta, without generally using Vedantic terms but taking its essence, removing of the ritualistic and theistic aspects of Veda and Vedanta, with emphasis on Yoga, practical ethics, and removal of suffering.

The Buddha's illustrious and noble personality and magnanimous heart lent force to his teachings, and they became very popular and widespread for some centuries. That was not sufficient. The the general mass of the people were confused, and because of the negativistic teachings of impermanence (ksanika-vada), No-self doctrine (anatma-vada), denial of God, and excessive emphasis on austere dry monasticism and its indiscriminate propagation the ordinary people were misled and confused. Unable to follow these monastic ideals, the whole society was rampant with corruption. By the 3rd century A.D., many degenerate sects arose among the Buddhists. Uvamacara works like the Guhya-Samaja-Tantra, with bacchanalian and orgiastic doctrines based on Manjusri-Mulakalpa, emerged to support and advocate such corrupt practices. In the prevailing climate of thought and life, the vedic society also had to some extent degenerated for want of great teachers and lack of propagation of good ideas and true doctrines. As a result all sorts of immoral practices set in and were

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abounding throughout the country. There was no doubt great reaction in the country and attempts were being made to bring back the people to the pure Vedic Dharma, as we can see from the rise of the Gupta and other Empires in the North, and the Pallava, Cola, Cera and Pandya kingdoms in the South, who supported the Sanatana Vaidika Dharma. The bhakti movements of Alvars and the Nayanmars also strove hard to bring back the Buddhists and other people to the pure Vedic path and preached theistic devotional Vaisnavism and Saivism. The great Sankara arose at this juncture in Kerala. He saw clearly that if the people were to be won back to the Vedic fold then:

1. The extravagances of the Vedic ritualism involving sacrificing of animals must be mitigated and ritualism must be purified and spiritualized.
2. There must be place for a God of mercy who can be worshipped and loved.
3. The absolutistic and the personalistic sruti texts must be harmonized, and there must be place for Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga in a harmonious manner.
4. A thousand year long Buddhistic heritage could not be done away with. The good points in it, which are not contradictory to the Vedic doctrines, must be fused with the Vedic heritage, purifying and modifying both to suit the times.
5. Society must be oriented to the spiritual ideal; but the duties and modes of spiritual sadhana of people must be regulated and harmonized with their capacities, understanding, and stage of development; and the pitfalls of monasticism advocated universally by Buddhism without any high criteria, which ideal, must be avoided. Society must grow from within in an all-round harmonious way, and not merely certain titbits of reforms be superimposed on it, neglecting all other aspects.

6. The negativistic and apparently nihilistic philosophy of Buddhism must be replaced by the philosophy of the Upanisadic Absolute Brahman, presenting itself in all as the Self (Atman) and leading to Peace and Bliss Eternal, and it must be co-ordinated with the other systems of philosophy based on the Vedas, which are dualistic and theistic in nature, but more easy for the people in general to understand and follow.(39-40)

His Methodology

Sankara started on his mission of propounding the comprehensive Advaitic doctrines as the basic uniting philosophy and of rejuvenation of society and revival of Vaidika Dharma under its aegis, with its twofold objectives of abhyudaya and nihsreyasa, that is the Secular Welfare and Prosperity and Spiritual Felicity and Freedom.

He travelled for the fulfillment of his mission all over the country on foot, from north to south and east to west – from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Kamrup to Kutch, meeting opponents in debate and making disciples and purifying social and religious customs and practices.

He wrote profound commentaries in beautiful, clear, simple Sanskrit on the

Prasthanatraya, the three spacious foundational texts of the Vedanta philosophy, namely, (1) the Upanisads, where the Vedic, thought and quest for the Ultimate Reality finds its culmination and is known as the Vedanta; (2) the Brahma Sutra-s which systematizes on a rational basis the various spiritual revelations and realizations of the sages that are recorded in the Upanisads and strings them together into a coherent philosophy of Brahman, the Ultimate

Reality; and (3) the Bhagavad Gita, which gives practical expression to this philosophy by showing the paths to the realization of that Reality and methods of bringing our everyday life into harmony with the philosophical truths. Thus Vedanta has all these three aspects in its methodology. It has revelational tradition (sruti) as its basis, where we have got the profound direct spiritual intuitions of the great seers; then these intuitions have been put on a rational basis (yukti); and they are verified and realized by oneself in life through sadhana or spiritual science of a universally realizable philosophical religion open to rational investigation. It goes to the credit of the brilliant insight of Sankara to have introduced this triple scientific methodology for the first time in the history of philosophy and religion in the world.

Sankara, when propounding his philosophy takes recourse to all these three. He declares that he considers the sruti as the primary authority or means of valid knowledge (pramana) with regard to transcendental Truth, since it alone can give us first hand knowledge of supra-sensual and supra-mental spiritual verities to form the hypotheses which may be later reasoned out and verified. If there is no experiential hypothesis, neither reasoning nor verification can take place.

Reason Vis-a-Vis Revelation (Scripture)

Acharya Sankara gave supreme importance to the scriptures. Sankara saw with his keen insight clearly the limitations of empirical reason and its conflicting nature when it is not wedded to experienced facts. Though reason is a very good instrument, and we have perforce to take recourse to it in communicating with others, it is not capable of yielding truth or facts by itself. It can evaluate, analyze, co-ordinate, and infer; but it can act only on the basis of direct or previous perceptions. It cannot create facts or determine their nature, which depend

on the things themselves and not on reason. It can be compared to light which can only reveal existing things, but does not create them. This is evident in the case of sensual knowledge or perception. The knowledge of things depends upon the perception through the senses, but not the things themselves. But the senses may be defective. Then comes reason to correct our knowledge with reference to previous perceptions of oneself or perceptions of others. So reason is very helpful in rectifying our knowledge through analysis, coordination, etc., and to posit new facts on the basis of inference which, however, needs to be verified by direct perception.

Just as in regard to external phenomena and the external world, the senses are our instruments of knowledge (pramana), similarly with regard to things that are transcendental and are not amenable to the senses or the ordinary mind, it is intuition or suprasensual perception that is the criterion of knowledge. We directly perceive the truth, we do not reason it out; for the truth of the reason itself is ultimately directly perceived and not by another reason. No amount of reasoning in a vacuum can give us an inkling of truth, nor can we experience it by mere reasoning. It can only build on the perceived facts, and its conclusions again need to truth of reasoning is also intuited; it cannot depend on another reasoning to prove its truth, for it will lead to regress ad-infinitum. In the case of both external sensual phenomena and the supra-sensual reality, direct perception or experience (aparoksa anubhuti) is the primary criterion. And the scripture is the record of such spiritual perceptions. They give us the hypothesis of these truths; and to ascertain their correctness and their probability we have to employ reason, and must realize them to verify their truth as facts and have conviction.

That is why Sankara, while giving primacy to the scriptures or revelation (sruti), stresses the inevitability of the other two pramanas, reasoning (yukti) and realization

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(suanubhuti), and this last one he considers the final clinching pramana (Vivekacudamani, 477, 474-478). It is accepted that though reason cannot give truth directly, truth cannot contradict or be disharmonious with reason. Otherwise any individual or group can claim its book as a scripture.

Again a scripture is not a pramana in empirical matters, where other pramanas are operative.

It is the beauty of the Upanisads that they themselves uphold this threefold criteria of truth. They declare: *atma va are drastavyah srotavyo, mantavyo, nididhyasitavyah*. The Self, my dear, is to be seen. How has it to be seen? It has to be heard about first (*srotavyah*); It should be first heard about from those who have seen or from the scriptures. Then we have to cogitate about it (*mantavyah*) and find out whether it stands to reason, whether the intuition is correct and whether there is possibility of its existence. After proper reflection on the matter, when working faith is generated in the mind, we have to strive to realize it ourselves through the prescribed *sadhana-s* or spiritual practices (*nididhyasa*) (Vivekacudamani, 70). We may also compare our experience with other experimenters in the field. However, real Self-realization brings immediate and unshakable certitude and conviction like seeing the sun. Ultimately, realization is the last and final pramana. It is only when we have experienced the Truth ourselves and find it is harmony with the other pramana-s that we get a firm conviction and not before that, either through the scripture or through reasoning severally. All the three pramana-s have to be employed to arrive at Truth in a mutually co-ordinated manner to reinforce each other and not in isolation, for though each pramana is great in its own place, there will remain uncertainty and every change of going wrong or awry if each is pursued exclusively. Therefore

Sankara says: srutya, yuktya, svanubhutyā janatva sarvatmyam atmanah – have realized the oneness and infinity of the Self through Scripture, reasoning and one's own experience.

The spiritual truths are given to us through the sruti; because these relate to anandriya vastu (supra-sensual Reality). Sankara says that in regard to supra-sensual verities: Sruti alone is our pramana (atindriya vastu visaye sruttireva na pramanam). But anyone may produce a book and claim it is a scripture.

So it must be in harmony with reason or logic (yukti, nyaya or tarka). But tarka by itself has no firm basis (tarka apratishthanat). One person may put forward a conclusion very cogently and another may demolish it with equally powerful reasons, as we see in life. Still all the while, we may only be wrangling with words and not concerned with actual facts at all. Hence the appeal to experience. All three together must affirm the Truth.

A Harmonizing Philosophy

Sankara builds up his comprehensive philosophy on the basis of sruti, supports it with reason, and appeals to experience. Sankara was not only scientific in his outlook, but also comprehensive and inclusive in his approach. He did not argue with others, or refute other systems of philosophy, merely for the sake of refuting. He refuted only those points which were contrary to any of the above three criteria. He accepted the other aspects in them to the extent they were in harmony with these. He knew that Truth can be expressed in different ways on the phenomenal plane, and as such he also accepted the relative validity of certain aspects in their own fields, though not as Ultimate Truth. For instance, he was bold enough to state that each pramana has its own sphere of operation where it is fully valid. Sruti has its own sphere,

reasoning has its own sphere, and sense-perception has its own. And in each sphere that particular type of pramana is operative and dominant. He declares that the scriptures have not validity where it contradicts direct perception. Supposing the sruti comes to the level of the phenomenal world, where the sense-perception is pramana and says something which is contrary to our sense-experience, that fire is dark and cold, then, even if there be hundreds of such texts they have to be rejected as invalid, because they contradict what is the patent experience of everybody on the sense-perceptino plane that fire is brilliant and hot. Similarly, sense-experience cannot be a valid authority on the transcendental plane. There is day and night from the standpoint of the earth, but there is not day and night from the standpoint of the sun.

The genius of Sankara was that he tried to co-ordinate all levels of human experience, transcendental and empirical, grade them properly. He gave them the validity they deserved in their own realm. How did he do it? He did it on the basis of the criteria of Reality. There are three types of realities in experience. One is the absolute unchanging Reality, unaffected by the three divisions of time – past, present, and future (trikala-abadhita), and is always the same. If an entity is ever subject to change nad has only conditioned existence, it cannot be called absolutely real. What is It that changes? So, there is an unchanging Reality in the midst of all the changes which is the Absolute Existence. This is termed paramarthika satta. It has to be realized as it is.

This pure Existence is designated in the Upanisads as sat or Brahman, and it is realized as the pure Self within every being, the unchanging Witness (saksi) of all changes.

Then there is the ever-changing dynamic universe (jagat), which we experience as an object on the phenomenal plane, in which we as empirical persons live and act, philosophize,

and realize values, as he points out in his Introduction to the commentary on the Brahma Sutra-s. This has only conditioned phenomenal or empirical reality (vyavaharka satta), like the reality of day and night on the earth. The souls (jiva-s) are like the reflections of the sun in water, reflections of the Absolute in the psycho-physical organisms. They have bondage and liberation from the phenomenal point of view; but the real Inner Self in all beings, being the Brahman itself, which is the Ground of the universe, is ever pure, free, and perfect (nitya-suddha-buddha-muktasvabhava) like the sun which is ever luminous and has no day and night, though it is their cause on the earth. Then there is pratibhasika satta, which is apparent reality, like the mirage which is experienced and is mistaken for water but is not amenable to activity as water. Such apparent objects have not even empirical reality, but can cause us fear and trouble due to the delusion or mistake notions.

The universe, on the other hand, though it is an ever-changing flow in the process of time, and things are not the same for two moments, cannot be dismissed as unreal like the mirage because we live and move and have our being in it as empirical personalities in the universe are related to each other as conditioned realities and have their mutual relative validity as long as they last. Change is the very essence of the universe, it is jagat (constant dynamic movement and it is change that makes activity possible. The changing universe of names and forms and concepts derives its reality from the unchanging Absolute or Brahman, which is its unchanging ground. It cannot exist by itself apart from Brahman, whereas Brahman being Absolute Existence (sat) can remain without the manifested universe. This is realized in transcendental experience we have in deep-sleep state where we have something akin to non-dualistic Selfawareness without the awareness of the universe or personality as an object, or even of the ego as 'I'.

Brahman transcends time, space, and causation, which are aspects of maya; It is satyam jnanam, anantam (Absolute Existence – Consciousness-Infinity). Brahman being Infinite, is Absolute Bliss (anandam) as well; hence it is often referred to as sat-cit-ananda. The universe is subject to Time-Space-Causation, and thus it is, as it were, Its (Brahman's) opposite. In this sense, the universe taken in itself is mithya (relatively or phenomenally real); i.e. when compared to Brahman, it is a-satyam or a-sat (not-real), a jnanam or a-cit (not-conscious), an=anantam or sa-antam (non-infinite or finite) and nir-anandam (not-blissful). The universe expresses the characteristics of Brahman under conditions of Time-Space-Causation in a dichotomistic manner (dvandvatmaka), that is, existence-non-existence, knowledge-ignorance, massive-minute, happiness-misery, etc.

So, there are these three types of realities. Sankara pointed out that the Sruti states that the Ultimate Reality is non-dual indivisible Brahman (akhandam advitiam Brahma), and from that this whole universe has emerged through its inscrutable Power called maya, the Principle of projection and relativity. We can and do intuitively grasp Brahman, the Supreme Reality, taught by the sruti, as our Inner-Self (pratyagatman). When we come to the phenomenal world of mental cum sense experience with Time-Space-Causation, reason becomes operative. Therefore, there must be a rational process by which we can understand and co-ordinate the whole phenomena. Sri Sankara builds up with scriptural authority a consistent and coherent cosmology delineating the evolution of the universe from that Brahman through the power of maya. Within this universe man can validly conduct his various empirical activities including those related to science and technology as already pointed out. If he confines only to that, he misses the Reality and becomes self-alienated by holding on to the unreal.

In relation to the universe and the living beings, Brahman associated with Its maya-power is Isvara, the Creator and the Lord of the Universe, who can be adored, worshipped, and loved.

Thus Brahman is seen by us from the phenomenal point of view as the triad of Isvara-jiva-jagat (God-Soul-Universe) and will ever appear to be so in time, and the game of the universe will go on. As such, Sankara asserts that we cannot do away with moral and ethical principles, devotion to and love of God, and even rituals, as also other aspirations and values which have a reference to the relative life in this world or in after-life based on personality. And the scriptures too have their validity with reference to man's social and spiritual well-being. They point out the way to us to transcend this relative existence and realize the Ultimate Truth, the incorporeal Infinite Saccidananda Atman as our real Self, and how to order our life here in society towards that end.

Acharya Sankara points out that the dharma taught by the Vedas is two-fold leading to abhyudaya (Secular Welfare) and nihsreyasa (Spiritual Summum Bonum). Therefore, society must be based on dharma (individual and social conduct in harmony with Truth), oriented to spiritual Liberation (moksa). Sankara recognized dharma, karma, samsara etc. in relative existence, which he holds can be transcended by bhakti (devotion) and self-surrender to Isvara (the personal aspect of Brahman), or by jnana of the Transpersonal Absolute Brahman as one's real Self or Atman, that is, by Self-Knowledge. And karma is auxiliary to both.

Sankara, with the support of the sruti, propounds not only the identify of Atman and

Brahman, but also of Isvara-jiva-jagat with Brahman, for they are the manifestations to us of Brahman through maya – Its innate Creative-Power, like the shining power of light. Maya, though experienced phenomenally as a separate entity, we cannot determine its precise nature (anirvacantya). Maya seems to hide Brahman-Atman, like could the sun, acts as the creative power of Isvara, covers the knowledge of the jiva, and serves as the material cause (prakrti) of the universe. It is inseparable from Brahman, like the burning property from fire; the burning property (dahika sakti) is its very nature (svarupa). The fire itself is not affected by it, only others are affected. Similarly, maya is not cognized in Brahman as a separate entity; it is felt and recognized by us only in the state of duality engendered by maya itself and not when identity with Brahman as a separate entity; it is felt and recognized by us only in the state of duality engendered by maya itself and not when identity with Brahman is realized. Thus Sankara establishes the absolute non-duality (Advaita), oneness of Brahman, in the transcendental state

(nirupadhika akhanda ekarasa advitiya Brahman) taught by the sruti as the Ultimate Reality of Truth.

Universal Spiritual Religion

Maya can be transcended and the identify with Brahman be realized by the jiva. Acharya

Sankara states that it can be done either: 1) By the Grace of Isvara (God), who is the lord of maya in the phenominal state, through devotion and self-surrender unto Him, i.e, through the path of bhakti, which is an easy path; or 2) By the direct but very difficult path of jnana (ksurasya dhara nisita duratyaya durgam pathah) taught by the sruti, to be traversed with the help of a srotريا brahma-nistha guru through the renunciation of every type of worldly or

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otherworldly desires and meditation on the identity texts of the sruti (mahavakya-s). The paths of Jnana-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, and several other yoga-s, leading ultimately to the supreme jnana and identify with Brahman, if desired, or conducive to merging in Isvara and remaining with Him for ever with out seeking identify with Brahman, if preferred, both are taught in the Bhagavad-Gita. Sankara also admits the possibility of Jnani-s remaining on the level of Bhakti and Karma as jivanmukta-s. he also holds that the followers of other yoga-s too, if desired, can ultimately reach to a state of identity with Brahman, through jnana (acquired by

God's Grace, niskama karma, or other means), for this identity is a pre-existing natural non-dual state attainable by all, since it is only to be recognized in knowledge, though initially the other yoga-s operate in the realm of duality. Here jnana or jnananista, that is being established in jnana may be distinguished from jnana marga or path of jnana.

The identity of Brahman-Atman or jivatman-paramatman can be realized through the path of jnana by those only whose minds have been rendered one-pointed, subtle, and pure through spiritual and moral disciplines and trained in seeing subtle realities. As the Katha Upanisad (1.3.12) says: "This Brahman is hidden deep in all beings as the Atman and is therefore not manifested; but it is verily perceived by aspirants well-versed in seeing subtle things by the one-pointed, sharp, subtle buddhi. "Brahman as Isvara is immanent in the universe and the living beings. He is perceived in the hearts of all beings as the individualized Soul (jivatman) reflected in the buddhi. That very same Brahman, when we look through our personality, into our interior, into our hearts, we experience as the Atman. There is the infinite sky: if we look through the window of our room, we just glimpse a small patch of it; but we are seeing the very same vast sky. It is neither a patch nor separate from the infinite sky. We realize it only when we come out of the room. Similarly, when we go beyond the five layers of

our personality (panca-kosa) and the ego, which are like walls hiding our real nature, we realize it only when we come out of the room. Similarly, when we go beyond the five layers of our personality (panca-kosa) and the ego, which we were taking as jivatman, subject to all limitations, and were getting only a distorted glimpse of it in our 'heart' or buddhi, is the very same Infinite Brahman, the substratum of the whole universe. So, Brahman is not only out there, is not only the substratum and source of the whole external universe, but also of our own personality as well, which is a part of the universe, and can be experienced and realized in the heart of our own being.

With that also dawns the knowledge that Brahman alone has become the triad Isvara-jivajagat. Brahman is both the Absolute and the Relative. And the Upanisad describing the result of such a realization, declares: "When that one Brahman is realized in the Transcendent (para) and the Relative (apara), the knots (of ignorance) in the heart are cut asunder, all doubts are scattered (like mist before the sun) and all the effects of works (karma) done in a state of phenomenal existence vanish (like unto those done in dream which vanish on waking)." Such a person looking upon this universe as Brahman only (Brahmaiva idam visvam), and seeing all beings in himself and himself in all beings, and the presence of the Lord everywhere (Isavyam idam sarvam), moves about in the world bringing good to all like the spring spontaneously (vasantavat lokahitam carantah) and opening the eyes of people of Truth (Vivekacudamani, 37).

Acarya Sankara was one such realized soul. Basing teaching on the all-pervasive principle of Advaita, the one Reality pervading all aspects of life and existence, he gave impetus and support to all types of genuine spiritual striving. He said that the quarrel between

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various religious sects for futile, because all are attempting to reach the same Reality in different ways under different names and forms. It is the one reality that is manifesting in different forms and hence can be viewed and approached in different ways. Those who see duality as final, who see

Reality as manifold, quarrel and come to conflict with each other, but those who see the One

Reality pervading everywhere do not do so. As Sri Krsna says in the *Gita*, “Seeing with an equal eye, the uniformly existing Lord, everywhere, the man of wisdom does not injure the self by the self, and thus reaches the Highest goal” (XIII.28). Also, “Verily, even here while living they have conquered relative existence whose mind rests in evenness; they indeed rest in Brahman, since Brahman is without any imperfection and is equal in all.” (V.19)

A Great Nation – Builder

Seeing the same self-working in, and manifesting through, all religions, and going towards the same Goal, directly or indirectly as the *Siva Mahimna stotra* says, Acharya Sankara gave support to the differing religious sects, whether they worshipped *Visnu*, *Siva*, *Sakti*, *Ganapati*, *Surya*, *Kumara*, or any other deity. That is why he is fittingly called the Sanmata Sthapanacarya *Acarya* who established Six Religious Sects). It is the same ancient spirit which was declared in the *Rg Veda*; ‘*Ekam sat; vipra bhudha vadanti*’. The same thought, the same river of this universal thought, is following through all Indian culture. That is why there had been very few religious conflicts in India, especially using violence, before the advent of fanatical

Muslims. It is Sankara’s genius that he gave philosophical basis and support to this idea of Oneness or Unity in Diversity, which is inherent in the very structure of Indian thought.

Acharya Sankara, through his universal philosophy gave a broad basis to all our thinking, both secular and spiritual, and then to perpetuate this philosophy and the establishment of *dharma*, of moral purity, which is an aid to the realization of the goal of life. He founded great spiritual centres called *matha-s*, at the four quarters of India, for the propagation of noble universal ideas and ideals - one at Puri in the East, another at Dwarka in the West a third at Badrinatha in the North, and the fourth at Srngagiri (Sringeri) in the South . He covered the whole country. Sankara asked his chief disciples who were installed as the heads of these mathas . They were given the task of disseminating dharma based on the twofold ideal of the Vedas - *abhyudaya* and *nishkalyana*.

He organized the wandering monks in the country into ten monastic Orders, called the *dasa-nami-sampradaya*, under the designations - Puri, Giri, Bharati, Sarasvati, Tirtha, Vana, Parvata, Sagara, Aranya, Asrama, and inspired them with the mission of uplifting the country out of the morass of moral corruption and degeneration. They were enjoined to work in the cities and towns, hills and forests, and in places of pilgrimage and sea-coasts, as well as to cultivate philosophical knowledge. They were at the same time to be devoted to spiritual life and higher learning and their propagation from the established Asrama-s, as the names of the Orders indicate. Thus the whole country was soon transformed and rejuvenated by the Vaidika Dharma which conduces to welfare in this world as well as spiritual fulfillment whereby we realize the highest goal, the summum bonum of life. (Mukhyanaanda, 140)

After accomplishing his mission, Sankara went to the holy Kedarnatha, the place of Siva in the Himalayas and entered into mahasamadhi.

Mukhyananda states, “Sankara was thus a great towering personality who within the course of a short life of 32 years, brought about a thorough revolution in the social, religious, spiritual, and philosophical life and thought of the country. He laid the foundations of modern Hinduism on a composite, comprehensive, and all-inclusive universal basis. He had such a brilliant mind, scientific viewpoint, and rational approach that he appeals to the modern man. He appears just and modern, in many respects, as if he were living today, for he was concerned with eternal universal thoughts. Some of the special problems that he dealt with in those days are there even today and the solutions that he suggested are so much applicable even now. That is why his appeal is there to all modern people as well.” (55)

Acharya Sankara was brilliant writer also in Sanskrit. His Sanskrit is mellifluous, and at the same time very forceful, impressive, and direct. He has not only written commentaries on the ten major Upanisads, and Brahma sutra and the Gita, but also produced a large number of other important secondary auxiliary works (prakarana grantha-s), like the Vivekacudamani, Upadesa Sahasrit, etc. they elucidate the different aspects and tenets of the Advaita philosophy and its practical implications, in a simple non-technical charming language, both in prose and verse, and show ways and means to the realization of the highest Truth. He has also composed numerous beautiful and profound stotra-s (hymns) of a philosophical and realizational nature as well as those in praise and glorification of the different forms of the Lord (Deities), and even of holy rivers and cities like Ganga and Kashi. They exhort men and women to devote themselves to the Lord and to fulfilment in life by realizing the highest Truth and not waste this precious human life. This was one of the ways in which he gave support and fillip to all genuine religious efforts of mankind.

Sankara was thus a great illumined sage, philosopher, scholar and poet; he was also a man of action, great reformer and organizer, and stabilizer of society by the resuscitation of ethical and spiritual values.

Contributions of Sri Sankara to the Religio-Philosophic Thought

The great and unique contributions of Sankara to the Religio philosophic though of the world are:

1. He co-ordinated the profound spiritual insights, and realizations of the Vedic seers recorded in the Upanisads and expounded the philosophy of Vedantic non-dualism (Advaita), founded, for the first time, on the triple basis (prasthamatraya) of the Upanisads the Brahma-sutra-s and the Gita, answering to spiritual tradition (sruti), rational investigation of Truth or Ultimate Reality (yukti), and Its actual verification or realization in life (svanubhati). Thus he rescued philosophy from vain speculation, and religion from mere dogmatic beliefs, and gave to both of them a rational, scientific, and universal basis. By bringing these to gether, to reinforce each other, he helped the evolution of a philosophic religion and spiritual science open to investigation, and at once rational, comprehensive, and universally realizable by every competent person, even as the case of physical sciences.

2. He gave a practical scientific foundation to philosophy by showing that the Absolute Spiritual Reality (Brahman), cognized as the experiential Self (Atman) in all, is the pure subject and the basis of all our knowledge and experience.

3. He pointed out that Maya-power of Brahman, is a fact of empirical experience, but is relativistic in nature, i.e. in the state of identity of the pure subject with Brahman, Maya and its products are not experiences. Maya is also the principle of apparent diversification through time, space, and causation, operative in this variegated universe,

which is its product (*maya –kalpita desa-kala-kalana–vaicitrya-chitri-kriam*). The products of maya too share its imponderable relativistic nature (*svakale satyavat bhati prabodhe sati-asat-bhavet; Atmabodha*, 6).

4. He showed that our empirical personality arises due to the mixing up through superimposition (*adhyasa*) of the Self (pure – subject) and the not self (the psycho-physical organism which, being a part of the objective universe, is an object). Hence all our empirical knowledge and activities, including those in the social, moral, scientific, philosophical, and religio – spiritual fields, are relativistic in nature, and have, therefore, only empirical, i.e.relative or conditional, validity.

5. He established that the empirical self (*jiva*) in the individuals is the phenomenal manifestation of the Supreme Self (*Atman*) which is identical with Brahman, the Absolute Spiritual Reality, and his identity is transcendently realizable where the Relativistic *maya* ceases to be *maya* and is identified with Brahman.

6. He declared that Brahman and *Isvara* (Godhead) are one and the same Infinite Spiritual Reality, viewed from the transcendental or monumental and the relative or phenomenal standpoints respectively that is, from the *nisprapanca*(devoid of the universe) and *saprapanca*(inclusive of the universe) points of view. The Supreme Brahman when viewed as associated with the universe is *Isvara* and as associated with the individual is *jiva*. Thus *brahman-atman-maya Isvara-jiva-jagat* are all identical transcendently, though they appear functionally different phenomenally for enacting the drama of the universe-game. They have validity in their respective spheres on the relative plane, just as the same H₂O can appear as water, ice, vapour, fog, frost, show, foam etc. under different conditions, exhibiting different properties. That Supreme non-dual reality (Tat-sat), where all such phenomenal distinctions cease and is beyond all empirical words and thought, is known to

us prior to Enlightenment only through the *sruti*, which is a record of supramental realizations.

7. He recognized and showed that within the framework of this comprehensive system of thought all human desires and goals (*purusartha-s*) secular achievements (*abhyudaya*) as well as religio-spiritual fulfillment (*nishreyasa*) (including gaining Heaven or *mukti*) are possible and can be meaningfully pursued by different persons according to their competence. For this purpose there are varied means and methods and different spiritual paths (*yoga-s*) suitable to different persons and conditions

Acharya Sankara harmonized all aspects of the teachings of the Upanisads (*vedanda*) and synthesized them with our empirical life, knowledge, and activities in his comprehensive system of thought giving them all graded values and validity. He could do this by the epoch – making discovery of *maya* as the Principle of relativity and thus posting the *paramarthika* (Noumenal or Transcendental) and *vyavaharika* (Phenomenal or Empirical) views of Reality. His other great discovery, or rather rediscovery, is that the empirical self (*jiva*) is none other than the Supreme Self (Atman – Brahman) reflected in every being. Thus the infinite potentialities and perfection of the supreme self lie hidden in man, like that of a big banyan tree in a minute seed (*vatakanika*), and hence everyone of us can manifest the infinite divine (brahman) within by unfolding the potentialities and realizing the truth. And to this realization he invites all mankind, reiterating the clarion call of Vedanta:

Srnavantu vive amrtasya putrah a ye dhamani divyani tasthanu vedahameta purusam mahantam aditya varnam tamasa parastat; tameva veditva atimrtyumeti nanyah pantha vidyate ayanaya.

The grate scientist Albert Einstein discovered the revolutionary Relativity Theory and the immense potentiality of the atom in recent times. Sankara was the great ‘Einstein’ of the philosophical world who discovered, more than twelve centuries ago, *maya* as a Relativity Principle and the infinite spiritual potentiality and perfection of the Soul as Atman. Besides, he is the brilliant sun of the religio-spiritual world illuminating the Himalayas of the Soul.(143)

It is only we study Sankara in the historical perspective of the development and evolution of the various religeo-philosophical concepts in the different schools and systems of philosophy that glory of the mighty edifice of thought that he erected from out of all those concepts, developed and refined further, culminating in the shining pinnacle of Advaita losing itself in the

Absolute Brahman with the Atman as the only Pure Witness.

Advantages of the Advaitic View – point

What are the advantages of the Advaitic view – point? *First* of all, it recognized the validity of the realizational statements in the Upansiads about the Infinite Trans-Personal, Nondual Homogeneous Absolute Reality, beyond words and thought, which is the source of all relative phenomena and is cognized as the Pure Witness Self in all.

Secondly, while it faces some inherent logical difficulty in accounting for the Infinite Non-dual Homogenous Noumenal Reality appearing as the phenomenal many (the origin of the universe and its beings is a profound mystery to all schools of religio-philosophic thought in the world as well as to science, not only to the Advaita philosophy), the logical difficulties faced by the dualistic systems are far greater and numerous. However, if we remember that all philosophizing is done within a given universe in which we find ourselves as living and

thinking personalities, Sankara's explanation, by posting *maya* and *adhyasa* as facts of experience, seems to reconcile satisfactorily the One and the many.

Thirdly on the phenomenal relative plane, it can broadly accept the different dualistic and idealistic modes of explanations also, since a phenomenon can be accounted for in different ways, for it is we who see it and account for it, in fact, there are several theistic, non-theistic, realistic, and idealistic explanations for the game of the universe, which exclude each other, for each considers its own view absolute. However, Sankara recognizes that they all have elaborated in their own way beautiful systems which can very well serve their votaries to reach the goals envisaged by them, for the psychological principal is *yat dhayati tat bhavati*-whatever one meditates upon that one becomes or attains,. (*yoyat sraddhah sa eva sah- Gita, XVII.3*).

Fourthly, the recognition of an Absolute Trans - Personal Reality and the phenomenal nature of Isvara as being our formulation of the Absolute on the empirical plane, allows for the conception worship, love, and contemplation of Ishvara under any name and form, as either 'He', or 'She', or 'It', and also without any form, with equal validity. Thus it renders support to all religious strivings and makes for religious harmony.¹²⁶ Also, unlike a Personal Creator-god, who is not a fact of experience universally and is conceived in different ways, and who presents lot of difficulties with regard to evil and misery in the world, Brahman as Trans – Personal Absolute Reality or Truth, which is ever present such difficulties. And Brahman is also a fact of intuitive experience at all times to all beings as their self.

Fifthly, it can also harmonize with science as it accepts *satkarya-vada* (effect is only modification of an existing cause, that is, the principle of Evolution and not Creation on the phenomenal plane, and renders explanation of things from the nature of things themselves, and

seeks no extraneous entity like a Creator-God for explanations *vivekananda's Complete works for the scientific aspect of Advaita*).

Sixthly, Brahman-atman being an existent Trans-Personal Reality or Truth, IT can be sought after by everyone, discovered, and realized by one's own efforts even by everyone, discovered, and realized by one's own efforts even as the scientific truths are discovered. There is no special favour for any one. Truth is equal to all, and open to all universally. It leads to fearlessness, strength, and self-reliance, whereas dependence on an extraneous principle such as Creator –God leads to fear, weakness, and self-abasement, unless it is surrender through pure love with a sense of belonging. Hence, the *Upanisads* advocate the worship of God as one's own higher or real Self and declare that he who thinks of the worshipped as different from oneself does not know the Truth. (*anyo asau anyo ahamasmi iti na sa veda'-Brh. Up.,1.4.10*).

Seventhly, Advaitic conception does not take away anything from the bhakti attitude, but bhakti finds its real fulfillment in Advaita when the bhakti loses himself completely in God, and God alone remains. Bhakti becomes more intense as one goes nearer and nearer to God, when the bhakti completely obliterates his ego and separateness, bhakti is at its highest. That is why Sri Ramakrishna says *para-bhakti* and *para-jnana* are the same. Otherwise by his separate identity, even as apart of him, he is putting a limitation on the omnipresence of God, at least by his thought of separateness, or it implies that god is incomplete without him. Some *bhakti-s* want to keep their separate identity to enjoy the bliss of god. This is, in a sense, selfish attitude, because they love God for their own enjoyment and not for His own sake. The true bhakti will say, 'wipe me out, O lord, and Thou alone reign supreme.' Further, it also makes

meaningful the repeated declaration of the sruti of the identity of Atman and Brahman, and the insistent exhortation to realize this identity through Self-knowledge.

Eighthly, by recognizing the oneness and solidarity of all existence and the same Atman existing in all beings, Advaita becomes the greatest sanction and meaningful support for the practice of ethics and morality. It makes for freedom, equality, fearlessness, and love of all beings, as the aspirant sees the same Self in all.

Conclusion

Thus Acarya Sankara has given us a very profound and compressive interpretation of the

Vedanta in his works which for facility of reference is called the ‘Advaita Philosophy’ by others. It may not be a perfect system in every way. In this imperfect world, nothing is perfect. But with proper understanding and application it leads us to the Supreme Reality and, meets the needs of all grades of aspira.

Sankara was a great spiritual genius with a comprehensive penetrating intellect, breadth of vision, depth of insight, and a daring passion for Truth. He was imbued with an intense reforming zeal for the all-round regeneration of society and establishment of Dharma, and this he accomplished on the basis of the highest spiritual philosophy which declares the Oneness of all Existence and the Divinity of man.

Dr S Radhakrishnan observes on Sankara in his Indian Philosophy, Vol 2:

The Advaitism of Sankara is a system of great speculative daring and logical subtlety. It's austere intellectualism, its remorseless logic, which marches on in different

to the hopes and beliefs of man, its relative freedom from theological obsessions, make it a great example of a purely philosophical scheme. Thibaut, who cannot be charged with any partiality for Sankara, speaks of his philosophy in these words "The doctrine advocated by Sankara is, from a purely philosophical point of view, and apart from all theological considerations, the most important and interesting one which has arisen on Indian soil; neither those forms of the Vedanta which diverge from the view represented by Sankara, nor any of the non-Vedantic systems can be compared with the so called orthodox

Vedanta in boldness, depth and subtlety of speculations." It is impossible to read Sankara's writings packed as they are with serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality. With his acute feeling of the immeasurable world, his stirring gaze into the abysmal mysteries of spirit, his unswerving resolve to say neither more nor less than what could be proved, Sankara stands out as a heroic figure of the first rank in the somewhat motley crowd of the religious thinkers of medieval India. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after. It has a self-justifying wholeness characteristic of works of art. It expounds its own presuppositions, is related by its own end, and holds all its elements in a stable, reasoned equipoise.

The list of qualifications which Sankara lays down for a student of Philosophy brings out how, for him, philosophy is not an intellectual pursuit but a dedicated life. The first, "discrimination between things eternal and non-eternal" demands of the student the power of thought, which helps him to distinguish between the unchanging reality and the changing world. For those who possess this power, it is impossible to

desist from the enterprise of metaphysics. "Renunciation of the enjoyment of the reward here and in the other world" is the second requirement. In the empirical world and man's temporal life within it there is little to satisfy the aspirations of spirit. Philosophy gets its chance, as well as its justification, through the disillusionment which life brings. The seeker after truth must refuse to abase himself before things as they are and develop an austere detachment characteristic of the superior mind. Moral preparation is insisted on as the third requisite, and, lastly, longing for liberation (*mumukshutvam*) is mentioned. We must have a mind disposed, as St. Luke expresses it, "for eternal life."

Sankara present to us the true ideal of philosophy, which is not so much knowledge as wisdom, not so much logical learning as spiritual freedom. For Sankara, as for some of the greatest thinkers of the world like Plato and Plotinus, Spinoza and Hegel, Philosophy is the austere vision of eternal truth, majestic in its freedom from the petty cares of man's paltry life. Through the massive and at the same time subtle dialectic of Sankara there shows forth a vivid, emotional temperament, without which philosophy tends to become a mere game of logic. A master of the strictest logic, he is also master of a noble and animated poetry which belongs to another order. The rays of his genius have illumined the dark places of thought and soothed the sorrows of the most forlorn heart. While his philosophy fortifies and consoles many, there are, of course, those to whom it seems to be an abyss of contradiction and darkness. But whether we agree or differ, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves us where we were.

Sankara appeared, at one and the same time, as an eager champion of the orthodox faith and a spiritual reformer. He tried to bring back the age from the brilliant

luxury of the Puranas to the mystic truth of the Upanishads. The power of the faith to lead the soul to the higher life became for him the test of its strength. He felt impelled to attempt the spiritual direction of his age by formulating a philosophy and religion which could satisfy the ethical and spiritual needs of the people better than the systems of Buddhism,

Mimamsa and Bhakti. The theists were veiling the truth in a mist of sentiment. With their genius for mystical experience, they were indifferent to the practical concerns of life. The Mimamsaka emphasis on karma developed ritualism devoid of spirit. Virtue can face the dark perils of life and survive only if it be the fine flower of thought. The Advaita philosophy alone, in the opinion of Sankara, could do justice to the truth of the conflicting creeds, and so he wrote all his works with the one purpose of helping the individual to a realisation of the identity of his soul with Brahman, which is the means of liberation from samsara.

In his wanderings from his birthplace in Malabar to the Himalayas in the north he came across many phases of worship and accepted all those which had in them the power to elevate man and refine his life. He did not preach a single exclusive method of salvation, but composed hymns of unmistakable grandeur addressed to the different gods of popular Hinduism-Vishnu, Siva Sakti, Surya. All this affords a striking testimony to the universality of his sympathies and the wealth of natural endowment. While revivifying the popular religion, he also purified it. He put down the grosser manifestations of the Sakta worship in South India. In the Deccan, it is said that he suppressed the unclean worship of Siva as a dog under the name of Mallari, and the per-nicious practices of Kapalikas whose god Bhairava desired human victims. He

condemned branding or marking the body with the metallic designs. He learned from the Buddhist Church that discipline, freedom from superstition and ecclesiastical organisations help to preserve the faith clean and strong, and himself established ten religious orders of which four retain their prestige till to-day.

The life of Sankara makes a strong impression of contraries. He is a philosopher and a poet, a savant and a saint, a mystic and a religious reformer. Such diverse gifts did he possess that different images present themselves, if we try to recall his personality. One sees him in youth, on fire with intellectual ambition, a stiff and intrepid debater. Another regards him as a shrewd political genius, attempting to impress on the people a sense of unity. For a third, he is a calm philosopher engaged in the single effort to expose the contradictions of life and thought with an unmatched incisiveness. For a fourth, he is the mystic who declares that we are all greater than we know. There have been few minds more universal than his.

Sankara's system is unmatched for its metaphysical depth and logical power. Thought follows through naturally, until Advaitism is seen to complete and crown the edifice. It is a great example of monistic idealism which it is difficult to meet with a absolutely conclusive metaphysical refutation. Sankara holds up a vision of life acceptable in the highest moments of poetry and religion, when we are inclined to sympathise with his preference for intuition to the light of the understanding. So long as he remains on this high ground, he is unanswerable. But a lingering doubt oppresses the large majority of mankind, who very rarely get into these exalted heights. They feel that it is unjust to leave in such high disdain the world in which they live, move and

have their being, and relegate it to ajnana or darkness, offering merely a solace that all disagreeable appearances will quickly vanish in the eternal light. For them the all-transforming sunlight of the heights is spurious, and they declare that Sankara's system is one of mystical indifference to fact. That human suffering will be healed, that the whole world will vanish like a pitiful mirage, that all our trouble is of our own making, and that in the world's finale all people will find that absolute oneness which will suffice for all hearts, compose all resentments and atone for all crimes, seem to many to be pious assumptions. The entranced self-absorption which arms itself with sanctity, involves a cruel indifference to practical life hardly acceptable to average intelligence.

Sankara knows all this, and so gives us a logical theism which does not slight the intellect, does not scorn the wisdom of ages and is at the same time the highest intellectual account of the truth. What is the relation between the absolutism of intuition and the empirical theism of logic, Sankara does not tell us; for as Goethe wisely observed, "man is born not to solve the problem of the universe, but to find out where the problem begins, and then to restrain himself within the limits of the comprehensible". Sankara recognises that there is a region which we cannot penetrate, and a wise agnosticism is the only rational attitude. The greatness of Sankara's achievements rests on the peculiar intensity and splendour of thought with which the search for reality is conducted on the high idealism of spirit grappling with the difficult problems of life, regardless of theological consequences, and on the vision of a consummation which places divine glory on human life.

Supreme as a philosopher and a dialectician, great as a man of calm judgment and wide toleration, Sankara taught us to love truth, respect reason and realise the purpose of life. Twelve centuries have passed, and yet his influence is visible. He destroyed many an old dogma, not by violently attacking it, but by quietly suggesting something more spiritual too. He put into general circulation a vast body of important knowledge and formative ideas which, though contained in the Upanishads, were forgotten by the people, and thus recreated for us the distant past. He was not a dreaming idealist, but a practical visionary, a philosopher, and at the same time a man of action, what we may call a social idealist on the grand scale. Even those who do not agree with his general attitude to life will not be reluctant to allow him a place among the immortals. (656)

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